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AN UNFAMILIAR PORTRAIT OF FARINELLI

A MALE PRECURSOR OF GALLI-CURCI

BY JULIUS MATTFELD

THERE has probably never been a generation without its favorite coloratura since the days when Peri's "Euridice" gave the music-lovers of Florence and the world the first pleasure of operatic song. Our grandfathers speak of Jenny Lind; our fathers tell of Patti, *et al.*; and we enthuse over Galli-Curci—and, if we pause to think, whom will our children pit against our heroines of the operatic arena? Even so it must have been in other centuries.

The second season of the Chicago Opera Company in New York has just closed. Galli-Curci goes elsewhere; and at the Metropolitan we have Barrientos as the exponent of florid lyricism. It is a time in the annual opera season when the musical critic and historian, with a speculative turn of mind, might rest his brain from the labors of research to propound a curious riddle. If Galli-Curci were a man, would she be a coloratura? And we, no doubt, would not be able to suppress a smile at the seeming puerility of the question. Yet—all of the world's greatest coloratura sopranos have not always been women! That men have been among the number might scarcely occur to the best informed.

Preposterous, indeed, the thought that at one time even men should have been soprano coloraturas, should have vied no less with the women and have been preferred. The cases are not few, or exceptional; rather, to the contrary, the circumstance was an artistic institution in the religious as well as operatic life of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Such a singer was one Farinelli, of whom we write here; and we will have occasion to mention others in our narrative.

It is commonly stated in references to Farinelli that he sprang of a noble Neapolitan family. The assertion rests solely upon a statement of Farinelli's earliest biographer, the Padre Giovenale Sacchi. The learned Barnabite assures us that he observed among the papers in Farinelli's possession the credentials of nobility which Farinelli was required to present at the time when he was admitted, by the favor of the King of Spain, into the orders of Calatrava and St. Iago in 1750. Be this as it may, not to question the genuineness of the documents, it barely seems credible that parents of noble lineage should have acceded to the pernicious operation which would preserve the boy's soprano voice through life, if they destined him for the musical stage at all.

The practice, this of emasculating the male child of pubescent age, was one cultivated to prominent advantage in Italy during the seventeenth and early half of the eighteenth century; but cases are known to have existed far into the nineteenth century. During the period from 1550–1590 the cultivation of male trebles reached a high degree of development; and, as women were not permitted to sing in churches ("*mulier taceat in ecclesia*"), these *evirati*, as they were called, were drawn upon to supply the upper harmonies of the choral ensemble. In England the male alto was more conspicuous than in other countries, and in scores of old notation the part was described

as a counter-tenor. The voice, artificially created in this manner, combined the sweet-toned quality of a boy's treble timbre with the fully developed chest and lungs of the grown man. Though there is no evidence that the Church of Rome approved the practice, it certainly did not discountenance the presence of these singers in the Papal Chapel. And whether a singer of this type had willingly or not submitted to this mutilation, in every known instance of the more famous *evirati*, there is invariably a tale of woe to support the *raison d'être* of the condition. At any rate, it so happens that Farinelli's treble is further explained away by the story of an accident which necessitated the peculiar surgical treatment by which he was to become the most famous of male sopranos of history.

Now, Farinelli's real name was Carlo Broschi. How he came by the name of Farinelli has been a matter of much conjecture. Some writers make bold to derive the sobriquet from the surmise that his father was either a miller or a seller of flour (*farina*); a second contention seeks to associate his name with that of three brothers, distinguished musical amateurs of Naples and presumably his patrons, named Farina. However, a third and simpler explanation obtains, namely, that he assumed out of gratitude the name of his uncle, Cristiano Farinelli, who may have contributed in some way toward his musical education in childhood, especially if his parent was a seller of flour and not improbably in that event poor. The uncle was himself a musician of commendable talents, and later enjoyed in London no inconsiderable reputation as a violinist and composer of pleasing instrumental music.

Carlo Broschi, or as we will hereafter call him, Farinelli, was born in Naples, January 24, 1705. He was several years

younger than his brother Riccardo, who achieved some distinction as a composer and collaborator of Italian operas. The father appears also to have possessed musical ability and taught his son Carlo the rudiments of music until the boy entered the singing-school of Porpora, the same who was for some time Haydn's preceptor in Vienna. Even as a half-grown lad, Farinelli became known for the beauty of his voice. That he took a prominent part in the musical entertainments of the day is quite likely, when we recall that he was popularly referred to as *il ragazzo* (the boy).

In 1722 Farinelli accompanied his master to Rome whither Porpora went to superintend the production of his opera "Eumene" at the Teatro Aliberti. Farinelli was a boy in his teens; nevertheless he was cast for an important rôle in the forthcoming opera. The work was performed; and in it Farinelli obtained one of the most unique triumphs in the annals of opera-history, at the age of seventeen.

The production was altogether calculated for effect. In the Papal city at this time was a German trumpet-player who had excited the admiration of the Romans by his mastery of the trumpet. For him Porpora composed an obbligato part to an air in which Farinelli was to vie with the instrumentalist in sustaining a note of great length, swelling it gradually in loudness and diminishing it to faintest audibility. The German, as was expected, executed the feat with remarkable nicety. Thereupon Farinelli was allotted the feat; and not only is he said to have equalled the facility and endurance of the rival virtuoso, but to have excelled him in duration and brilliance, carrying the enthusiasm of the people to the wildest pitch by a series of shakes and variations which, to all appearances, he introduced extemporaneously into the music. We are prob-

ably not wrong in believing that Porpora himself had arranged the ornamentation beforehand. It was, at all costs, a sensational début.

Farinelli remained under the tutelage of Porpora until 1724. With that year begin the travels which eventually lead him to all the principal musical centers of Europe. He now visited Vienna for the first time; a year later he appeared in Venice. Subsequently he came to Naples. In his native city he sang in company with the renowned Vittoria Tesi-Tramontini. In spite of the fact that the celebrated cantatrice was at the zenith of her career—she, strange to say, formed the habit of singing bass songs transposed an octave higher—Farinelli was in no way eclipsed.

In 1727 Farinelli was in Bologna. Here he was to experience the chagrin of a severer test. If he had triumphed easily over his trumpet rival in Rome, he was to meet here in Bologna a vocalist like himself, one older in years, though perhaps less gifted than himself in voice—Antonio Bernacchi. Bernacchi was a singer of Farinelli's type, a male coloratura soprano, and had trained himself in a style of extreme vocalization, which earned him the title of "*Il Rè dei cantatori*." Meeting so formidable a rival was no negligible matter artistically, and Farinelli strove with all the beauties of voice and style to rise to the situation. But in vain. Bernacchi sang, repeating every roulade, trill, and cadenza of Farinelli's execution, in his own more mature manner. Magnanimously Farinelli acknowledged the superior art of the Bolognese rival and besought his advice in the perfection of his own voice.

Leaving Bologna, Farinelli resumed his travels, everywhere successful, everywhere vanquishing rival compatriots, everywhere gaining riches and honors. In 1731 he appeared for the third time in Vienna. And it proved to be a significant

sojourn. Hitherto, as a pupil of Porpora, his style had been one of bravura and display; now it was to become one offset by pathos and sincerity, delicacy and simplicity. This change, which so greatly modified Farinelli's artistry, is claimed to have been suggested by the Emperor Charles VI. Farinelli, never slow, apparently, to realize an advantage, wisely adopted the admirable royal counsel; and the unity of two such contrasted manners resulted in a happy medium.

The years that now follow witnessed the ever-increasing renown of Farinelli; and in 1734 he made his first journey to England. He arrived at a crucial moment in the managerial rivalry of operatic London. Some years previous, Porpora had been summoned thither to undertake the management of an opera company organized by an aristocratic clique in opposition to that under the direction of Handel. The enterprise suffered serious losses, and Porpora returned to the continent. Meanwhile, Handel had to contend with similar reverses, and in spite of vicissitudes became on his own account an impresario. But a new opposition was presently set afoot, again supported by the British nobility, and Porpora's co-operation re-enlisted. The venture, notwithstanding, failed to capture the public interest. Porpora then thought of his illustrious pupil. Farinelli obeyed the summons, and the reorganized troupe, which included Signora Cuzzoni, the basso Montagnana, and the vaunted male soprano Senesino, who had quarrelled with the great Handel, helped to drive the German into bankruptcy.

Farinelli made his first appearance at the Theatre, Lincoln's Inn, which Handel was compelled to leave. The opera was "*Artaserse*," chiefly the work of Farinelli's brother Riccardo Broschi. In it the trick of the air in Porpora's "*Eumene*"—

less spectacularly employed in Handel's popular "Largo"—was repeated, and in the air that followed, Farinelli set a pace which was beyond the rapidity of execution of the orchestral violins of those days. Farinelli's success was, of course, instantly assured. He sang at the Court to the accompaniment of the Princess Royal, was fêted by the courtiers, and received with such a show of admiration that the enthusiasm of the dilettanti finally culminated in the historical ejaculation of a lady in one of the boxes—"One God and one Farinelli!" During the three years from 1734-1736 which he spent in London, Farinelli's income was not less than £5,000 per annum.

Toward the end of this period, Farinelli left England for Spain, and on his way passed through France. His stay in that country was brief, but long enough, in his particular case, to overcome the prejudice against foreign singers which characterized the French attitude of this time. Louis XV. heard him sing in the Queen's apartments, and applauded him to an extent which astonished the Court. In compliment, the King presented Farinelli with the royal portrait set in diamonds, and handsomely supplemented the gift with 500 louis d'or. When, at last, Farinelli reached Madrid, he arrived, as he had in London, at an exceedingly opportune moment. Philip V. had fallen a sorry victim to melancholy depression, neglected the affairs of state and was loath to preside even over the council in important matters. The Queen, anxious to dispel her consort's inertia, and hearing of Farinelli's advent, invited him to the palace to sing in a chamber adjoining His Majesty's, an arrangement to which the singer readily

consented. The desired effect was instantaneous: Philip, roused to life and energy, permitted himself to be shaved for the first time in many weeks, and resumed the activities of his kingdom. It is but one of the notable instances of the therapeutic value of music.

Farinelli proposed to stay only a short while in Spain, but by persuasion of the Queen, fortune kept him at the Spanish court for close on twenty-five years, with a salary of 50,000 francs. And thus the inimitable Farinelli separated himself for ever from the world of art. On Philip's death he succeeded to the good graces of Ferdinand VI., who, like his father, was subject to some hidden malady. Though never appointed outright to the premiership, he was constantly in consultation with the Minister La Ensenada on questions of policy and of international import, and, in consequence, enjoyed a position superior to that of any minister. His reward was the cross of Calatrava, in 1750, one of the highest orders in Spain. Only at the accession to power of Charles III, in 1759, was he obliged to quit the country, owing presumably to his disapproval of the schemes of the new monarch.

Farinelli was now fifty-seven years old. He preserved his salary from the Spanish Government, but on condition that he would not embarrass the Spanish interests in Naples by his presence there. He, therefore, chose Bologna, and passed the remaining decades of his life in a splendid palazzo, which he built himself in 1761, a mile from the city. He died quietly July 15, 1782, aged seventy-seven, in perfect retirement. During all this long period he made a single journey abroad, and this to pay his respects to the Pope.